

Means and Ends: Education in a Secular Age

THE SERIOUS WRITER of today lives in a very much secularized world, a world of measurable objects, a world of space and time considerations, a world that must be studied not only rationally, but scientifically. Now, this situation did not suddenly come about in the middle of the seventeenth century. It has been developing since that time, and I think if we wanted to be very careful we could push it far back of the seventeenth century. But many people agree that a very important part of the process becomes evident in the seventeenth century.

An important man in this process is the French mathematician and philosopher, René Descartes (1596–1650). Descartes distinguished, you will remember, the mind from matter, and thus split the world into two different realms. On one side there was the realm of mental activity, the world of ideas, fancies, and all kinds of subjective things. And outside of the human head was the world of objects and things. God alone, Descartes thought, knew how to relate the two worlds, the world of time and space and the world of mental activity. And Descartes, it ought to be said, certainly had no intention of removing God from the process (he was a Christian), or of attacking a religion. Nevertheless, the dualism that Descartes set up worked steadily through the decades to clear the path for a more careful study of the world of things. It cleared the highway for the marvelous development of the so-called hard sciences like physics, chemistry, and biology. They have grown magnificently, particularly in our own twentieth century.

Think, for instance, how fast and how far chemistry and physics have gone since even 1915, how far medical science has gone since 1900. I am convinced that if it had not been for these wonderful developments and changes, I would have been blind long before this time, and probably dead. So I have a real personal gratitude to register for the marvelous things that have happened in the hard sciences.

We do not operate on a person's body because of hunches and blind instincts. We used to. I'm told sometimes we do it now, but we try to avoid it as much as possible. Instead, we try to examine the body, make the most meticulous of tests, so as to know what we're doing when we perform the operation. We develop the tools and machines that allow us to make incredibly finer measurements.

I expect that most of you have heard that among Descartes's accomplishments, was "to cut the throat of poetry." But again, that was not in the least his intention. In any case, how could his dualism have possibly brought about that? In the early stages of mankind, the man of religion, the man of science, the seer, and the prognosticator, frequently was all bound up in one single

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person. He was the truth-teller, the man you went to for advice about everything. And he frequently wrote in poetry. Originally, it was he who would tell the truth about us and our activities and beliefs. But what was the truth? With the triumph of science, which clearly could convey some very powerful and exact truths about how the world we live in makes out, and how our bodies can be best cured of disease, and how we can build skyscrapers, or build a vehicle that can go faster than the speed of sound, we are driven to ask, what was the nature of the truth that poetry, on the other hand, told us? Surely it was a highly subjective truth. Much of it was fantasy, or could be questioned as fantasy, or was merely an imaginative suggestion, or a set of rhetorical flourishes, matters which obviously could not be objectively true.

Now, I don't want to overstate matters, that with Descartes in the middle of the seventeenth century, the throat of poetry was cut, poetry was dismantled, the subjective world was demolished—not at all! Poetry did not suddenly become worthless. The kind of truth that worked in the world did, however, seem to lie more and more in the hands of the scientists. And poetry and fiction and drama, too, more and more were thought of as providing entertainment or an escape from the world of fact. Indeed, insofar as the poet has in the eyes of the public been dislodged from his position as the great truth-sayer, speaking the living word of truth, he has been left by some simply to play among the pretty flowers of life.

I do not mean to say that this state of affairs appeared all at once. It did not. As late as the Victorian period a hundred years ago poetry was still regarded by many people, sometimes by the poets themselves, as the dispenser of wisdom. Though a close examination of the process will show even then, significant changes in the nature of poetry.

In the late nineteenth century, for example, Wordsworth and Coleridge were much concerned to accommodate poetry to sci-

ence, to relate it to science, and to insist that poetry still had very important things to say. Yet if the problem was not solved by Coleridge and Wordsworth (I don't think it was really solved), it was at least more and more recognized to be a problem, a serious problem.

In the twentieth century the character of what literary artists may say and whether they engage truth at all has come under more rigorous examination. One of our popular, though serious novelists, engages the problem in most of his novels. I am thinking here of Walker Percy. He deals with the problem quite directly, and he has written in addition to his novels, two books on semiotics, and tells us that he has a third one that he is working on now.

His Jefferson Lecture, the lecturer chosen by the National Endowment for the Humanities to be delivered each year, was given in May. It begins with a reference to Cartesianism. Percy calls this split made by René Descartes: "the San Andreas Fault in the modern mind." For three centuries this fault line has been visible to scholars of what we sometimes call the science of man, sociology, say, or psychology. They work uneasily, he thinks, on one side of the crevice, sometimes attempt to straddle it, and often try to deny that the fissure even exists. Thus they talk about things which can often be measured, such as synapses between the nerves, or electric currents which run along nerve pathways. These all belong to the realm of things—these electrical energies, nerve patterns and so on.

But scholars set down beside them mental events, emotional, transcendental values, and these are not things at all. For can you measure a thought, or weigh an emotion? You can do it metaphorically—we say that all the time—but can you really in any scientific sense? Transcendental values as such are not "things," but something very different. Thus, Percy says that the social scientists sometimes talk about the mind, that is, the mental activity, as a function of the brain. The brain is indeed a solid thing made up of a very complicated mass of

nerves. But Walker Percy doesn't believe that the phrase, "it's a function of," tells us much, or helps explain anything about mental activity, as he puts it. Who would say that the particular vision given to us by a madonna painted by Raphael is a function of the pigments and canvas that Raphael used? In some sense it is, but so what? How is a mental impression related to those physical things that Raphael used to produce it? How can "function of" tell us very much about the nature of the changes over from things to certain activities that we all experience in viewing the painting, or in reading in poetry, or experiencing in our daily emotional lives?

In any case, what does a twentieth-century American, the typical man in the street, make of the situation? Much of it will depend, of course, upon his upbringing and his education, taking that term in its fullest sense. If he knows the work of Walker Percy or of T. S. Eliot or of Flannery O'Connor, he may be fully aware of the "San Andreas Fault" that runs through the twentieth-century mind, and may have found his own way of dealing with it. He will have met that sophisticated problem, one hopes, with an answering sophistication of his own. If, however, if he is, let's say, a fundamentalist, he will scarcely understand the issues that his very ignorance of the new ideas, and his habitual nurture do so much to obscure from him. Nevertheless, ignorance and confusion are never the best defenses against the new and advancing intellectual ideas. A few years in college will probably tell the son or daughter of the fundamentalist a good many things that he had not understood before and may dislodge him from his ignorance. I say "a few years in college" because I am talking in largely general, institutional, and statistical terms. Obviously there are colleges and colleges, and obviously what the individual student may get from any college may be very different from what another receives from it.

To return to the typical American citizen of our time; what impresses him powerfully

is not the fact of theoretical constructions. Even his own college may have given him only a very vague notion of what kind of truth the hard sciences give. What does impress him is what applied science has done and proposes to do further. A citizen knows—well or perhaps more vaguely, but he knows—that theoretical and experimental science undergirds our vast technological establishment, and he is much impressed with the power and mighty accomplishment of that technological achievement.



Now, I would be the last to distract from it. It has been admirable and its powerful good has been immense. But I hardly need to say that its powerful evil has been immense also. Witness the Second World War and the other wars that we have fought since. We Americans have been brought up to praise and even venerate our great technical accomplishments. We speak day-in and day-out of dollar values and winning. Our very university system taken as a whole powerfully expresses this view of the world. The praise of a winning football or basketball team, the salary paid to the coach and to his retinue of assistant coaches, the scandalous revelations about what sometimes really goes on in putting prize athletes through college, not so much to educate them as to allow them to use their talents for athletic fame.

Such evidence convincingly shows the way in which the highest educational ideals are often trampled on in our will to win anything, everything, at any cost. To win suc-

cess of any sort becomes a national badge of honor. If you doubt this, read the advertisements in your newspapers and magazines, or listen occasionally to the pleas for your attention that come over our radios or on our television screens.

A great corporation relates every morning as I turn on my spot news coverage: "Americans want to succeed, not simply to survive." And a great national newspaper signs off its TV achievement by telling us that it is "the daily diary of the American dream." And what is the American dream?

and more devoted to—perhaps more and more obsessed by—a certain kind of truth, and which regards more and more suspiciously claims to authenticity that cannot be tested by scientific means.

Before moving on to other topics, I would like to set forth another judgment on what happens when a culture comes to regard as truly consequential truth only that kind which can be validated by scientific testing. I want to read a paragraph from a statement made by Professor Eric Voegelin a number of years ago in a book called *From*



It would seem to be one of worldly success. That is trumpeted all day long and every evening long in dozens of revelations of that dream as it expresses itself in clothing, motor cars, houses, clubs, travel, and hundreds of other ways. But the terms are always material terms. "Well," somebody says, "What of it? You don't ask our great corporations to praise poverty, do you?" No, I don't. I'm not arguing that we should forbid such ads, even if we could. What I am calling to your attention is the impact of that kind of exhortation on every American citizen. It is powerful, it is very pervasive, but much of it appears to be non-Christian, if not actually anti-Christian. I am particularly concerned here with how a populace, so thoroughly secularized as ours seems to be, can be profitably addressed by an author who is a Christian or is even simply sympathetic with Christian ideas. I am also concerned with the prospect for the study of the humanities in a world that is more

Enlightenment to Revolution.

Existence has the structure of the In-Between, of the Platonic *metaxy* [*Metaxu* is the Greek word meaning "in-between"] and if anything is constant in the history of mankind, it is the language of tension between life and death, immortality and mortality, perfection and imperfection, time and timelessness, between order and disorder, truth and untruth, sense and senselessness of existence, between *amor Dei* and *amor sui*, *l'âme ouverte* and *l'âme close*; between the virtues of openness toward the ground of being such as faith, hope and love, and the vices of infolding closure such as hubris and revolt; between the moods of joy and despair; and between alienation in its double meaning of alienation from the world and alienation from God. If we split these pairs of symbols, and hypostatize the poles of the tension as independent entities [that is, if we split the tension between earth and heaven and simply say, we will just talk

about earth—that's the important thing, or just talk about heaven—that's the important thing], we destroy the reality of existence as it has been experienced by the creators of the tensional symbolisms; we lose consciousness and intellect; we deform our humanity and reduce ourselves to a state of quiet despair or activist conformity to the "age," of drug addiction or television-watching, of hedonistic stupor or murderous possession of truth, of suffering from the absurdity of existence or indulgence in any divertissement (in Pascal's sense), that promises to substitute as a "value" for reality lost. In the language of Heraclitus and Plato: Dream life usurps the place of wake life. [I think we would say "waking life."]¹

Voegelin writes a very compact, highly compressed style. Moreover, his ideas are new and unfamiliar to a great many of us, or else, they are so old and traditional that they impress us as radically fresh and strange. The statement that we live in an "in-between" may seem indeed very strange and puzzling. But we can take the expression quite literally. Man is indubitably an animal, but while any other animal that we know of has a short memory and can hardly foresee the future, man can become interested in proposals and institutions that will go on long after his own death, and on the contrary, he can immerse himself in customs that go back for five thousand years. Mankind can thus have some sort of intimations of immortal life, something possessing the range of interests of a god. In short, man is an animal who has in a very limited way, a godlike range of interests. But if he takes a notion that he really is a god, he usually turns into something like a demon. Man may have heroic possibilities, but he is definitely not a god. There will be lamentable failures also if he tries to be simply an animal. He lacks the other animals' safeguards and inhibitions. Man trying to be just a good animal always turns out to be so much worse than any other animal.

So mankind is always in an uncomforta-

ble posture, neither a self-contained, self-regulated wild creature, nor a wise and beneficent god who occupies a realm of endless time, or a realm outside of time. But if man has lived fruitfully in this state of being in which he is in tension with two finally opposed realms, there lies the prospect of glory and joy, as well as the prospect of horror and despair. Moreover, as Voegelin says, if we try to fixate on either of the opposed poles, we do become indeed alienated from full human life. We do, then, indeed, as Voegelin says,

... deform our humanity and reduce ourselves to a state of quiet despair or activist conformity to the "age," of drug addiction or television-watching, of hedonistic stupor or murderous possession of truth. . . .

Let me break into the quotation here at this point to call the names of Hitler and Stalin as special appropriate illustrations of the "murderous possession of truth." Both of them were quite satisfied about how history was coming out, and they were very quick on the job to kill a few million people in order to help history on with its proper task. But back to my quotation:

... suffering from the absurdity of existence or indulgence in any divertissement ... that promises to substitute as a "value" for reality lost. In the language of Heraclitus and Plato: Dream life usurps the place of wake life.

Few of us moderns are receptive to being admonished in language drawn from Heraclitus or Plato. Try it out. You'll find it doesn't help much. But after all, Voegelin's radical modernism is based squarely on the ancient Greek philosophers, and on the testaments of the Judeo-Christian tradition. Moreover, when Voegelin mentions as ways of leading a dream life, rather than the wide-awake life, drug addiction and television-watching, we can be quite sure that he has in mind, among other things, our own America.

I had promised to talk about some of the ways in which the modern author and the serious author of our day may deal with an audience that is as thoroughly infected with secularism as ours is. When I first began teaching English, I was told immediately that English was a service department. Our job was to help with the grammar and punctuation of students who were studying objects of real importance, such as chemical engineering, anatomy, or city government. Even so, fifty years ago the universities were already moving away from the classics and from the arts to the sciences, theoretical and applied. They were concerned to teach means, how to do things, how things work, and not ends, goals, purposes. As the machinery developed by the culture became more and more complicated, pressure needed to study such subjects was tremendously increased. I am thinking here not so much of what happened to a few old and privileged schools, but of the great state universities and their allied institutions, including the many more who were described as universities, but whose studies, frankly, were those meant to teach people how to get trained for a job. It's been one of the great fallacies of the American system to call things by the wrong names.

To the average student the liberal arts seem peculiarly unqualified for guaranteeing the student entry into a good job in a highly technological society. You miss my point entirely, however, if you think that I believe the matter of getting a job is unimportant. It is, of course. But for the masses in a secular age, the liberal arts have seemed to qualify the recipient for only one special job—that of teaching other liberal arts—not as the equipment for any good citizen who ought to know what the proper goals of life are.

The point that I want to make then, is not a disparagement of work or even work in a highly technological society. It is rather just this: technical training and much of the theoretical science that lies behind it has to do with means, how to do a job most effi-

ciently, how to carry out this particular quest cheaply, and so on. But important as the problem of means is, the problem of ends is even more important. We have comparatively little education in the matter of ends and purposes. The institutions that once nurtured such ideas and interests were the church, the usual course of study at the college, the teaching of manners and morals in old-fashioned schools, and so on. These institutions have become more and more disparaged. In actual practice our civilization is top-heavy with machinery, and flushed with pride at what that has accomplished. Society has allowed the advertising industry to tell us what we ought to aspire to win. Thus, what success really means is the kind of house you ought to live in, the kind of car you ought to drive, the restaurants you should patronize, and the kind of underwear, refrigerator, or book you ought to buy. Look at the TV for an hour or so each morning and note the prevailing notion of what the good life is or ought to be in modern America. The message is, work hard, get the means that allow you to acquire these rich bundles of delightful prizes.

How have some of our writers responded to this state of affairs? Many of them by providing simply more entertainment. Writing becomes a trade, a craft, and sometimes it is done very successfully. But the serious artist has a more difficult job. How is he going to address himself to a secularized society? How is he going to get a hearing? How is he going to make even those few serious readers see what he is talking about? One of my old teachers at Vanderbilt, John Crowe Ransom, a poet, was well aware of the general situation. I want to present a poem of his that describes very accurately what has happened and to show one of the kinds of methods that the serious artist has used.

Ransom called his poem "Persistent Explorer."

The noise of water teased his literal ears
Which heard the distant drumming and thus

scored:
Water is falling—it fell—therefore it roared.
But he cried, that is more than water I hear.

He went still higher, and on the dizzy brink
His eyes confirmed with vision what he had
heard:

This is but tumbling water. Again he
demurred:
That was not only water flashing, I think.

But listen as he might, look fast or slow,
It was water, only water, tons of it
Dropping into the gorge, and every bit
Was water, the insipid chemical, H₂O.

* * *

The sound was tremendous, but it was no voice
That spoke to him. The spectacle was grand
But still it spelled him nothing, nothing and
spell
Forbade him whether to cower or rejoice.

What would he have it spell? He scarcely knew;
Only that water and nothing but water filled
His eyes and ears, nothing but water that
spilled;
And if the smoke and rattle of water drew

From the deep thickets of his mind the train,
The fierce fauns and the timid tenants there
That burst their bonds and rushed upon the air,
Why, he must turn and beat them down again.

But he, as a modern secularized man knows
that images of a goddess or fauns and
nymphs coming out of the froth of the
water, are simply fantasy. As a rational
man, he has to dismiss them.

So be it. And no unreasonable outcry
The pilgrim made; only a rueful grin
Spread over his lips until he drew them in;
He did not sit upon a rock and die.

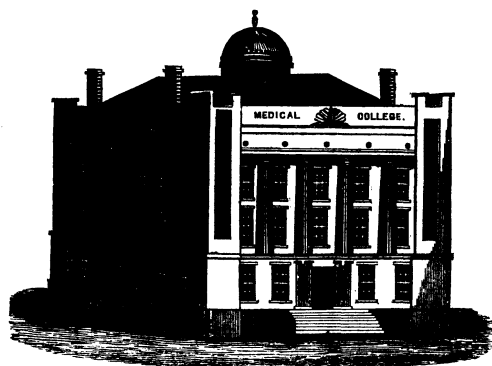
This modern poet is not doing what the
Romantic poet would do, grief-stricken,
tempted to commit suicide, finding out that
nature, its reverence gone, has nothing to
say to him. He grins. The joke's on him fi-
nally. The joke is on modern man.

There were many ways of dying; witness, if he
Commit himself to the water, and descend

Wrapped in the water, turn water at the end,
And flow with the great water out to sea.

But there are many ways of living, too.
And let his enemies gibe, but let them say
That he would throw this continent away
And seek another country—as he would do.²

Well, did Mr. Ransom find another coun-
try? A world that truly fulfilled him—that
existed beyond the world depicted by sci-
ence? I don't know. If his explorer's search
turns out to be futile, why had he expected
anything more than what happens? So
much for Ransom's explorer, but did Ran-
som himself ever discover that other coun-
try? One qualified to satisfy the whole man,
the emotional man as well as the scientific
man? Again, I don't know. But my interest
in quoting this poem is not to try to settle
that question. I read the poem primarily for
its account of what modern learning has
done to the world in which most of us live
and what it is likely to do to a great deal of
Romantic poetry.



Here's another poem, which again does
not reveal Allen Tate's conception of what
an enduring world would be like. I read it,
however, because he beautifully describes
the anguished state in which some of the
sensitive observers of our time have found
themselves. You will note that the poem
does not end with a description of a com-
plete world, but rather an anguished prayer
to be allowed to return to an earlier world.

The poem has proved difficult for some

readers. I remember one back in the 1930s who found he could get nowhere with it. He began, he told me, by taking two good highballs and sat down to it, but confessed that he still didn't know what the poem meant to say. I don't have the highballs for you, and I think that for our purposes we had best set them aside. Nevertheless, I think you can see what Tate is saying. His poem is called the "Last Days of Alice." He doesn't identify Alice, but part of the educated reader's job is to see who Alice is.

Alice grown lazy, mammoth but not fat,
Declines upon her lost and twilight age;
Above in the dozing leaves the grinning cat
Quivers forever with his abstract rage:

Whatever light swayed on the perilous gate
Forever sways, nor will the arching grass,
Caught when the world clattered, undulate
In the deep suspension of the looking-glass.

Surely this is the Alice of *Alice in Wonderland*, and the cat who dissolves away until



finally there is nothing left but his abstract grin, and surely the Alice who went through the looking glass and found that curious, strange, inhuman, logical world, a

whole world laid out as upon a chess board—all of these things tell us this is Alice of *Alice in Wonderland* and *Alice Through the Looking-Glass*.

Mr. Tate is suggesting that modern man has become Alice. He's looking at himself in a mirror and trying to get into the mirror. He's creating a world out of his own mind. And so he goes on to say

Turned absent-minded by infinity
She cannot move unless her double move,
The All-Alice of the world's entity
Smashed in the anger of her hopeless love,

She tries to find herself completely in that world, the world completely knowledgeable to her, understood fully.

The poet has described a person who has broken into a world which is beautifully logical, where everything fits together perfectly and is beautifully adjusted, but it is just an inhuman world.

Alone to the weight of impassivity,
Incest of spirit, theorem of desire,
Without will as chalky cliffs by the sea,
Empty as the bodiless flesh of fire:

All space, that heaven is a dayless night,
A nightless day driven by perfect lust
For vacancy, in which her bored eyesight
Stares at the drowsy cubes of human dust.

Alice would see all of you before me here as just "drowsy cubes of human dust" because you have become in this world of pure things, merely things, perfectly measurable and so on. But then the poet changes suddenly and says

—We too back to the world shall never pass
Through the shattered door, a dumb shade-
harried crowd
Being all infinite, function depth and mass
Without figure, a mathematical shroud

Hurled at the air—bless'd without sin!
O God of our flesh, return us to Your wrath,
Let us be evil could we enter in
Your grace, and falter on the stony path!³

It's a passionate poem, all right. The bleakness of the world that modern man has created out of his own brain, as he looks at himself in the mirror, is brilliantly, but balefully described in stanza six, "Alone to the weight of impassivity, incest of spirit, theorem of desire." Those of us who have remained human finally long for flesh that is not bodiless, not "empty as the bodiless flesh of fire," but it is a world that more and more seems to control us rather than one that we can ourselves control. After all, we've constructed it, but unfortunately we worry that we are unable to control ourselves. And if we are correct, then Alice's world becomes infinitely more terrifying now that we have such marvelous instruments in our hands.

The poem says that we human beings are blessed without sins, but the reason is not that we have become saints. We have simply agreed that sin does not exist. And so to be blessed without sin does not amount to very much of a coup after all. If there is any sin, then surely we are all sinners. So the poet, speaking in the poem, would rather be returned to God's wrath and to be dealt with as a sinner than live in the new dispensation. It is an anguished prayer, one that begs God to return us to His wrath. Yet why is He appealed to as "God of our flesh"? We ordinarily think of God as a spirit, but remember that the issue here is not spirit and flesh in the usual senses, but the concrete as against the abstract.

Brief references to Walker Percy and to a poem by Ransom and one by Tate can do no more than suggest how some of our writers address themselves to the problem I have been discussing. I would like to cite more examples, but this essay already crowds upon the limits assigned to me.

Yet it is important to call this problem to your attention, for it is not merely a problem that concerns the literary artist. It bears powerfully on the whole problem of college education—the need to study the ends of life as well as the means for making a living. The vaunted term "liberal education" becomes meaningless if our study is to be no more than how to manipulate mechanisms and how to manipulate our fellows. That kind of training cannot possibly "liberate" anyone's mind.

1. Eric Voegelin, *From Enlightenment to Revolution*, ed. John H. Hallowell (Durham, N.C.: Duke University, 1975), viii.
2. John Crowe Ransom, *Two Gentlemen in Bonds* (New York: Knopf, 1927), 43–44.
3. Allen Tate, *Poems, 1922–1947* (New York: Scribner's, 1948), 115–116.

Illustrations

- P. 19. Cleveland Medical College, Cleveland, Ohio, c. 1847.

All illustrations are in books of the Dover Pictorial Archives.

